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SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR'S MARCH 23 MEETING WITH VP ABDEL MEHDI

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: In a March 23 meeting with the Ambassador, VP Abdel Mehdi shared his analysis of the latest IDF strikes on the International Zone; discussed the reasons for his withdrawal of his veto of the Provincial Powers Law; speculated on the CoR's priorities when it reconvenes; described a long heart to heart talk he just had with PM Maliki; and agreed with the Ambassador on the importance of the Prime Minister using the Executive Council. End summary.

IDF/JAM Analysis  
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¶2. (S) The Ambassador met with Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi at the latter's IZ residence on March 23. Abdul Mehdi announced that a mortar or rocket had impacted approximately fifteen meters from his Karrada residence earlier that morning, which led him to speculate that perhaps the JAM Special Groups were trying to send a message by simultaneously targeting both ISCI and the Embassy compound. He noted that the last few days had seen an escalation of Sadrism activity against the Dawa Party, ISCI and the U.S., perhaps in response to Iraqi Army operations in Al-Kut. Abdul Mehdi said that he and Prime Minister Maliki suspected that the March 23 barrage might also be linked to the recent arrest of JAM Special Group figure "Hajji" Shibl. He observed that Muqtada al-Sadr's renewal of the JAM cease-fire, and his subsequent statement announcing his withdrawal from active management of the Sadrism movement, had created turbulence within the Sadrism ranks. He added that his impression was that there was no overall plan behind the latest IDF attacks, but wondered whether the Iranians were trying to apply pressure. "We need to watch and see -- and take precautions," the Iraqi Vice President summarized. He later added a cautionary note, saying that the U.S. and the GOI need to be careful not to over react to the IDF and thereby unify a Sadrism movement that is increasingly splintered.

¶3. (S) Regarding the situation in Al-Kut, Abdul Mehdi said that he had spoken many times with the Governor over the past few days, and the Governor had reassured him that the provincial authorities have control of the situation. He said the first flare up occurred because JAM elements had been targeting Americans and received a "strong response" from Iraqi security forces. The Governor blamed the second major clash on the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), saying that MOI had planned an operation without sufficient coordination with MNF-I and local Iraqi forces. The GOI operation involved three axes: on two of these, the MOI forces reached their target, but on the third they ran into heavy fire. The Governor was surprised that the MOI had arrived in Al-Kut with such a poorly prepared plan of attack. Abdul Mehdi said he was awaiting a full report on the Al-Kut operation.

¶4. (S) Returning to broader issues within the Sadrism

movement, Abdel Mehdi pointed out that a number of high ranking Sadrists who were formerly militant extremists have begun to moderate their views. "Life pushed (Special Groups leader) Ahmed Shahmani to that realization," said Abdel Mehdi.

#### Provincial Powers

15. (S) Turning to his decision to withdraw his veto of the Provincial Powers Law, Abdel Mehdi noted that the Sadrists have been publicly disparaging him, claiming that he was acting on orders from Vice President Cheney. Abdel Mehdi conceded, however, that one of the factors he took into account when deciding to end his veto was the need for tangible political progress in advance of next month's Congressional testimony. He said he also realized that the veto was likely to provoke rancorous debate once the CoR reconvened, even though he had been pleasantly surprised by the number of parties that welcomed his veto. "I had to send a strong message, which is why I didn't sign it into law initially, but we'll return to it later," said Abdel Mehdi, who suggested that June or July might be the right time to revisit the topic.

#### CoR Priorities

16. (S) Abdel Mehdi said he expected the CoR to take up the hydrocarbons law and "government issues" when it reconvenes. He speculated that PM Maliki might deliver a speech at the opening session setting out his government's agenda, and he suggested that the Ambassador encourage him to do so. Abdel Mehdi added that it was time for the CoR to have a serious

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discussion of regionalism.

#### Heart to Heart with Maliki

17. (S) Abdel Mehdi described at length a one-on-one meeting he had just held with PM Maliki, in which he sought to dispel rumors that he (Abdel Mehdi) was seeking to become Prime Minister. To the contrary, he claimed to have always reacted to such suggestions by professing to be "comfortable" in his position as Vice President and supportive of Maliki. Nevertheless, he told Maliki that the GOI must deliver and that Maliki's government is not delivering. He suggested that Maliki was so preoccupied with day to day affairs that he was failing to address the larger picture. For example, Maliki was managing his relations with opposition political parties in a way that made a certain amount of sense if taken individually, but made no sense at all when seen collectively. "What about unity? What about working with others?" Adel asked rhetorically. Maliki agreed, saying he felt like a doctor in a hospital running from patient to patient.

18. (S) "I want to help you," Abdel Mehdi told Maliki. "Your Minister of Oil is not working out; it is my duty to tell you. How can we work together if I cannot be frank with you?" Abdel Mehdi added. Maliki responded with evident emotion and thanked Abdel Mehdi for speaking with candor. Abdel Mehdi advised him to meet with his opponents and try to understand them. "Try to see how (Vice President) Al-Hashimi views things. He's not the same as you," Adel counseled. He suggested that Maliki continue with a planned visit to Basrah, promising that by the time Maliki returned to Baghdad, he (Adel) would prepare a paper outlining ideas on the way forward. One possibility was to focus on economic rather than political progress; he encouraged the PM to think about large projects, such as a better airport. (Maliki parried by offering to put Abdel Mehdi in charge of the economy, an offer Abdel Mehdi politely declined.) Abdel Mehdi said he agreed with the Ambassador's sense that Maliki

was drifting away from using the Executive Council and that this constituted a mistake on the PM's part. "He can't do it alone," said Abdel Mehdi, who nevertheless characterized his discussion with the PM as "positive" and said he left the meeting more optimistic than he was at the beginning.

#### SFA/SOFA Talks/Ministerial Slots

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19. (S) The Ambassador noted that he had recently walked PM Maliki through the reasons why the SFA and SOFA talks needed to be handled on parallel tracks by separate Iraqi teams. Adel suggested that the Executive Council, rather than the PCNS, should choose the negotiators for the SFA talks, since the PCNS could not be trusted to get such an important decision right. Likewise, he said that Maliki should use the Executive Council to work out agreement on filling the vacant ministerial posts in his cabinet. "If not, it would be difficult for him to fill those slots, and even if he does, the ministers would be weak," said Adel. He added: "I'll spend the week thinking about it before I see the PM again."

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